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Comical Modernity: Popular Humour and the Transformation of Urban Space in Late Nineteenth–Century Vienna. By Heidi Hakkarainen.

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Veronika Eszik

Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, ELKH, 1453 Budapest, P.O.B. 33, Hungary;
Eszik.Veronika@abtk.hu

It seems that this "laboratory of modernity", as late nineteenth-century Vienna is frequently labeled, never ceases to inspire historians, and with good reason. Four decades after Carl E. Schorske's classic *Fin de Siècle Vienna*[1] and following its multiple reinterpretations and revisions,[2] yet another fresh and insightful monograph has appeared on the experience of urban modernity in the Habsburg capital. Heidi Hakkarainen (University of Turku) chose a subject matter which offers both new sources and new methods to investigate how urban change was lived, viewed, and criticized by the Viennese.

The author investigates namely the textual and visual sources of Viennese popular humor between 1857 and 1890; that is to say, from the implementation of the Ringstrasse-project until approximately the completion of *Groß-Wien*'s unification and the beginnings of a huge new urban planning phase. The time frame also corresponds roughly to turning points in public history; sources are explored from the Liberals' takeover of the city until they lost power and the Lueger period began. As a spectacular indicator, it can be mentioned that the number of inhabitants almost tripled in Vienna between the two chosen dates (it rose from 476,000 to 1,365,000; p. 3). The extensively discussed transition towards modernity in the Habsburg capital generated much laughter, yet popular humor has never before been analyzed as an alternative, divergent way of interpreting modernity. Humor, however, has the ability to express lived experiences, fantasies, desires, anxieties, or ambivalent

1 Schorske, *Fin de Siècle Vienna*.

2 A concise summary of the historiography of the Schorskeian tradition and its critique: Szívós, *A másik Bécs*. Amongst the most eminent revisions we have to mention those by Steven Beller: Beller, *Vienna and the Jews 1867–1938*; Beller, *Rethinking Vienna 1900*.

feelings concerning urban change; by exaggerating phenomena it even makes them more visible for the historian. The humorous press is therefore an excellent source for the study of urban modernization from the citizens' point of view, putting aside, for a change, the standpoints of the architects, the city leaders or the urban theorists.

Because the Schorskeian perspective is that of intellectual history, the historiographical tradition based on it is often criticized for being concerned exclusively with high culture and encounters between outstanding intellectuals. The analysis of popular humor seems to be a rational choice—preferable to correcting some shortcomings of previous research—and offers something new. This special discourse on urban life reflects the bourgeoisie's perspective on the city, as the humorous press was written, published, and read mainly by the emerging Viennese middle class. But at the same time, the *Witzblätter*, and more specifically the three most important of them, the analyzed titles, *Der Figaro*, *Kikeriki* and *Der Floh*, with 20,000 subscribers each by the 1860s, were accessible to a wider public, and published readers' accounts too, including workers', immigrants' and women's. Therefore, these texts also serve to nuance the sharp division between high and popular culture—a welcome development which has already been implemented in other fields of cultural-historical research, like by Moritz Csáky in connection with operettas, favored by the most diverse social groups in late nineteenth-century Vienna.[3]

The sources are thus both appropriate to the research question and inspiringly unexplored. The author's approach is based on contextualization, which, according to her formulation, "is threefold. First, it is necessary to map the social and cultural circumstances that fashioned the uses of humour. For example, in nineteenth-century Vienna, the strict censorship and the development of mechanical printing technology were factors that significantly affected the uses of humour. Second, [the] analysis of humorous texts and images is based on disentangling the different contexts or meanings that these humorous accounts have fused together. […]. Third, in order to unpack the ambivalent meanings of jokes and cartoons published between 1857 and 1890, it is valuable to consult contemporary nineteenth-century theories of humour." (pp. 16–17) While the first and the second procedures seem to be carefully carried out, one can miss a more profound reliance on contemporary theories of humor, if they are usable and relevant—or an explanation of why they are only shortly mentioned if they are not so. Their keywords are present in explanations, but rarely does the reader learn how these theories affected contemporary joke production, if at all, or how, with what kind of restrictions and critiques can they be applied today. Nevertheless, contextualization is made with much attention, which makes the monograph very readable—not an easy endeavor when it comes to nineteenth-century jokes, which are rarely funny for present-day readers. Yet, Heidi Hakkarainen's

3 Csáky, *Ideologieder Operette und Wiener Moderne.*

carefully chosen caricatures, cartoons, and anecdotes are always both instructive and entertaining—the latter means that their material is made definitely understandable.

Bakhtinian and Billigian notions,[4] namely rebellious versus disciplinary humor, provide the theoretical framework for the first part of the study, which as a result concentrates on power relations (chapters 1–3, *Power and Space*, *Tensions with City Authorities*, *City out of Control*). The second part of the book treats humor as an identity-forming force, and "highlights the role of humour in practices of exclusion and inclusion." (p. 19) (chapters 4–5, *Knowing the City*, *Urban Types and Characters*).

The first chapter, *Power and Space*, can be regarded as a second introductory section to sketch the change of power relations in fin-de-siècle Vienna and the "battlefield for representations" (p. 40) that resulted from this shift of power. The chapter describes the functioning of censorship, a form of control exercised by the same authority (the Police) "that supervised street lighting, street paving, construction works and other practical matters in the city" (p. 28) which were also frequent objects of humorous criticism.

As the first of several very well-placed cartoons, the chapter offers one when discussing the great architectural competition which preceded the building of the Ringstrasse and its surroundings. The drawings show three imaginary plans that could hardly have won: on the first, Vienna is flooded and functions rather like Venice, on the second, the city is transformed into a kind of tribal village in a jungle, while the third is exactly the opposite, an over-rationalized, geometrical and inhuman future Vienna. According to the author's comment on the cartoon, "in all of these three plans, there is a clear tension between nature and technology, pre-modern and modern, industrial community and organic, "natural" community. These tensions created a kind of humour that was very closely related to nineteenth-century concerns and fears concerning modernity as well as to the enthusiasm and curiosity evoked by the novelty of the new era." (p. 39) The reason why it is worth evoking the illustration and its comment in length is that these are the concerns, fears, enthusiasm, and curiosity of citizens, rather than of professionals of urbanism and architecture: a perspective that the reader can find truly refreshing, and one which corresponds perfectly to the ambitions of the book under review. These cartoons could depict not only alternative but also absurd, impossible, or extremely exaggerated concepts of planning a new city; as a result, they have the advantage of going beyond the mental equipment that can be identified by investigating official documents on urban design.

The citizens' reaction to urban change is more precisely defined in the second chapter (*Tensions with City Authorities*) by a closer examination of their attitudes towards the control and the controllers of this transformation. Given the authoritarian

4 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule.*

style of the city leaders of fin-de-siècle Vienna, liberating humor had plenty of ammunition. In fact, regulation and overregulated city life soon became one of the main motifs of criticized urban modernity. *Kikeriki* provides a number of funny prohibition signs elsewhere policemen, city watchmen, and other figures of power are ridiculed. Resisting order by making fun of its keepers is a relatively well-known social function of humor. The analysis goes deeper, though, when Hakkarainen argues that humor also expressed "anxiety relating to the experience of becoming a member of an urban mass pervasively controlled by standards, rules and regulations;" (p. 58) that is to say, urban modernity was perceived as a threat to individuality. The phenomena recognized by contemporary theorists like Georg Simmel[5] and Ferdinand Tönnies[6] are convincingly shown to be also real fears of citizens by their humorous accounts of the growing anonymity and mechanization of everyday life (often represented by the senseless use of technological innovations such as the telegraph or city railways), or the uniformization of metropolitan space. The latter, a growing concern about a world "losing diversity and substance" (p. 68) is an ideal subject for caricature (and one to which present-day readers can easily relate), visually represented mostly by drawings of phalansteries which are geometrical in the extreme.

Paradoxically, feelings of insecurity concerning the city's future provoked not only criticism of regulations but also a demand for more of them. The author sensitively detects these ambiguous emotions concerning modern metropolitan space in the second part of the chapter where she investigates concerns about growing criminality, overcrowded spaces, traffic, bad street lighting, accidents, or other manifestations of the "increasing unmanageability of the city […] related in the first place to the accelerating breakthrough of modern capitalism, as the Liberals took charge in the City Council in the 1860s." (p. 71) Municipal leaders are blamed for having left several aspects of urbanization, above all housing, in the hands of the capitalist markets. A strong statement in this chapter is that the survey of humorous material shows how "the aspects of the transformation of the city that were most affected by modern capitalism were also those repeatedly criticized in popular humor as chaotic and dysfunctional." (p. 72)

Further refinement of the *Bürger*'s attitudes to control, regulations, and the authorities in their everyday environment arrives in the third chapter *(City out of Control)* which deals with fears about (publicly) losing control (e.g. falling), and presents examples of laughing at chaos, disorder, and turmoil—situations when the citizen's body or the city space is more or less out of control. A case developed at length is the comical exploitation of the parallels between the urban landscape dominated by revolutionary barricades and that of construction works. The example

5 Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life."

6 Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft.*

shows how tightly political and spatial order were linked, and also how the images of the 1848 revolution were marked in the citizens' memory. The author's remark ("Despite the fact that it is impossible to know how deep into the unconscious the roots of the humour about 1848 go, I find it safe to say that humour provided the means to ventilate the fears and desires relating to the year of the revolution" p. 113) leads us to a broader question about the use of terms of the book under review.

Interpreting humor as a means of relief is omnipresent in the monograph, and supposedly it is based on a common, internalized Freudian understanding of jokes. As a result, the liberating function of humor is presented as self-evident in a number of examples. I see no problem in analysis resulting in occasionally obvious statements: popular jokes function precisely because they are not over-sophisticated and they must reveal some kind of common experience or commonly understandable phenomena. There is, however, an unresolved tension between referring to Freud as an unavoidable cultural authority in contemporary Viennese bourgeois thinking and using his ideas to decode humorous material. Hakkarainen accepts Freud's concept that "jokes are socially accepted outlets for taboo subjects and cultural anxiety." (p. 17) But are we still convinced that dreams, slips of the tongue and jokes are direct manifestations of subconscious insecurities and fears? If so, recent literature about the issue would have been welcome. If not, it could have been made clearer when the text analyses contemporary understandings of the *Witzblätter* through the public's supposed Freudian approach; and when, as a historian, the author excavates anxieties corresponding to urban modernity with the help of Freudian interpretation of her sources.

It is nevertheless by commenting on another anxiety—that of losing nature—that Hakkarainen develops one of her most exciting findings. Nostalgia for lost greenery—she argues—"reveals the reactionary and anti-modernist vein from which much of the middle-class popular humor sprang. Yet a longing for nature had something very modern in itself. It is a good example of how late nineteenth-century anti-modernist attitudes emerged from modern experiences, and how resisting modernity acquired thoroughly modern forms of expression." (p. 117) This conclusion fits perfectly into the discourse built by historians of ideas when they claim, for instance that "what we identify heuristically as anti-modernism is in a very complex and entangled relationship with modernism," and that anti-modernism is both a "negative double of modernism" and "the critique of modernism within modernism."[7] Completing these arguments with empirical material and showing how the ongoing struggle between tradition and progress is translated into the conflict between the natural and the comically unnatural, is highly appreciated.

7 Mishkova, Turda, and Trencsényi, *Discourses of Collective*, 2–3.

Knowing the City, the title of the fourth chapter, is a tricky one: although the author claims that "knowing the city increasingly meant owning the city: memories of the old city distinguished members of the mythical *Wienerthum* from newcomers," (p. 168) the section is more about how impossible it is to know a city undergoing continuous transformation. Optical illusions, malfunctions of the senses, lost confidence in perception are frequently treated problems in contemporary discourses about modern metropolitan life. This increasingly unfamiliar environment triggered nostalgia for the lost, pre-modern *Alt-Wien*. "It was an imaginary place, a culturally constructed counterpoint to the modern city, representing qualities that were seen to be absent from the contemporary capital: cosiness, security and a sense of community." (p. 147) Belonging to this lost community is something that makes one a Viennese, and that's how, through the theme of nostalgia, the book turns towards the huge topic of identity. Two types of comical response to this loss are analyzed in the chapter: caricatures comparing the old and the new city, and personified monuments expressing certain emotions. Humor helps to deal with feelings of loss, which is a collective experience of the *Bürger*—that's how emotional communities are formed (the term is Barbara H. Rosenwein's). Interestingly, these emotions had a significant spatial aspect, as "the dichotomy between old and new began to shape the ways of understanding of the urban fabric and city structure;" (p. 150) that is to say everything that was regarded as original and old was concentrated in the city center, while what was new and suspicious appeared in the suburbs. The chapter convincingly demonstrates that humor draws its own mental maps, on which we can find hotspots of modernity's critique. It is also of interest that this kind of humor, based on common knowledge about the old, and common insecurities about the new, could define the Viennese.

The next, last, and longest chapter *(Urban Types and Characters)* discusses in detail the latter: typical Viennese figures. Emblematic and problematic figures appear in this section: women, Jews, strangers, the underclass. The most ambitious part of the presentation deals with the intersections of gender studies, modernity-theories, and urban history. Starting from the statement that modernity is characterized by the challenging of traditional gender roles, the chapter gives an excellent overview of how urban phenomena reflect the consequences of this shift. The changing city itself is frequently personified as a capricious young woman, changing her clothes and mood all the time. Furthermore, real women were more and more visible—freely circulating in the metropolitan space, creating a disturbance in traditional "normality". As the modern city was often viewed as a threat to the patriarchal order, anti-modernism was tightly linked to anti-feminism|argues Hakkarainen. As in the previous chapters, the overlapping concepts of gender, modernity, and urban change become readable by means of specific sources: jokes about working women, or about cross-dressers walking on the Ringstrasse—where else?

Likewise, laughter about ethnic minorities and strangers was a convenient way to highlight stereotypes about different groups that were somehow significant in fin-de-siècle Viennese life. The study comments also on the highly problematic relationship between modernity and Jewishness. This huge issue is narrowed down to the question of "how the discourses of Jewishness and of the modern city were linked in the popular humor of the Gründerzeit."(p. 208) Hakkarainen concludes that humorous press, as the creator of a specific discourse on Jews and as a powerful medium, had its role in the rapidly increasing verbal and physical aggression against Jews.

Finally, the chapter pursues the relationship between the city space and urban poverty by examining the role of the underclass in the discussion of modernity. The chapter covers a variety of sub-topics and ends with a conclusion that clarifies their interrelatedness: "As the closer examination of these comical characters has shown, in the Viennese humorous magazines modernity was associated with femininity, internationality, Jewishness and economic inequality. Accordingly, anti-modernist attitudes mingled with anti-feminism, anti-semitism and anti-capitalism."(p. 228)

This conclusion attests once again to the complexity of experiences investigated in the monograph. This thematic richness is consistently completed by a spatial aspect of analysis, by an imagined geography corresponding to the issue in question. The argumentation gains further sophistication and strong empirical support by this proceeding. However, it can be considered both an advantage and a disadvantage of the book that it touches on so many subjects. It permits a richness of thought and a comprehensive overview of modern urban phenomena; on the one hand, it results in a number of rather precipitous encounters on huge themes like psychoanalysis, nationalism, or (inner) colonialism—and their impact on urban change. Precisely because of this diversity of subjects, the text can obviously miss profundity here and there, but in contrast the author exploits her sources in an accurate and creative manner that makes the text not only very readable but also highly insightful. The book will be of great interest to scholars attentive to the refinement of the grand narrative about modernization as a mere history of salvation, just as it will be to urban and Habsburg historians in general.

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